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THE MAN OF THE GOOD HEART

Father Lacombe

In the Sturgeon River valley, eight miles north of Edmonton, lies the little village of St. Albert. And on the north slope of the valley, above the village, stands the St. Albert Mission.

In my search this year for famous western Canadian yarns, I visited the St. Albert mission on a quiet afternoon in late June. I was shown around by Father Simard, and as I stood with him for a moment on the steps of the Cathedral, Father Simard indicated the surrounding landscape and said, "If I were an artist, I should like to paint all that!"

He meant the soft, green countryside, the old buildings, the poplar trees, and the solitary elm shading a corner of the yard. He meant more, too. He was thinking of the past, and of all that St. Albert had meant in the making of the Canadian West. Possibly more than anything, he was thinking about Father Lacombe.

For Father Lacombe built the first church at St. Albert, and even today the whole place seems dominated by the spirit of this great peacemaker of the plains. Everywhere at the St. Albert Mission, the spirit of charity and interest in mankind is evident . . . at the Indian school, the old folk's home . . . in the long service of the ~~priests~~ Oblates and the Grey Nuns.

Even Father Lacombe's original church has its place, for it's a museum now, carrying on the heroic traditions of its builder. In this museum which contains so many relics of the

past, Father Simard showed me the hand-forged plough-share with which, despite many discoraging remarks from the settlers thereabouts, an early St. Albert priest grew wheat taller than a man. The blacksmith who forged the plough-share was noted for his strength. He was not a large man and when he was asked one day, "Where does the blacksmith live?" the story has it that the ~~priest~~ Smith picked up the anvil, pointed to his own house some distance away, and said, "He lives over there."

Father Simard showed me a belt and a few other tokens, all that remained of one priest who was eaten by the wolves.

At the altar, he showed me the figures carved by the priests from poplar wood; and in one of the cases we found bits of the skulls of Fathers Fafard and Marchand, the two priests who were massacred by the Indians at Frog Lake in 1885.

And last, on the slope below the Cathedral, Father Simard showed me the bronze statue of Father Lacombe himself -- the priest who was known to the Indians as "the Man of the Good Heart". The statue faces toward the bustling city of Edmonton -- an Edmonton far different from the simple log fort of the same name to which Father Lacombe came ~~in the 1840's~~ about the middle of last Century, to do his charitable work.

As I stood near the statue, looking toward Edmonton, I remembered a little story I had heard about this great ~~priest~~ missionary, which shows how human he really was.

Soon after Father Lacombe arrived at old Fort Edmonton, he became a close friend of John Rowand, the famous Hudson's Bay Factor.

Rowand loved the priest, but even this love was not as great as Rowand's interest in the welfare of the Hudson's Bay Company. At one time Father Lacombe found a couple of muskrat skins which had been caught out of season and were, therefore, worthless. The priest took the skins to an Indian woman and had her sew them onto the cuffs of his coat. He did not, at that time, fully realize that no one connected with the company should secure fur in any way except in the Company's interest.

When Rowand saw Father Lacombe's fur cuffs, he shouted, "Where did you get that fur? Who gave you the right to wear it?" For a moment Father Lacombe was stunned, then he tore off the fur and threw it in Rowand's face.

The incident, of course, later became a humerous anecdote, and in later years Father Lacombe was fond of telling about the generosity and courage of John Rowand.

But Father Lacombe himself was the very spirit of generosity and courage. Standing there beside Father Lacombe's statue on that June day in St. Albert, Father Simard and I decided that this would be a much, much better world if everyone could know and appreciate Father Lacombe's heroic deeds.

What did he do? Well, when he finally established the St. Albert mission in 1861, he straightway proved that he was a builder as well as a missionary. The nearby Sturgeon River was a serious

obstacle in high water, and Father Lacombe decided to build the first bridge west of the Great Lakes. He finally won the help of the Indians and the few white men by telling them that only those who helped build should use the bridge. When the bridge was completed it seemed like a miracle. The Indians crossed it time after time, just for the thrill. They sometimes even camped on it, and the story goes that one brave built a fire right in the middle of the bridge! After that the Indians had to camp on shore.

It was as peacemaker that Father Lacombe was best known, and at one time, his desire for peace nearly cost him his life.

In 1865 Father Lacombe received a mission dear to his heart: that of following the Indian tribes wherever they should go, helping them and converting them when he could. His quest took him into the camp of Chief Natous of the Blackfoot. The Blackfoot, Although slow to embrace the Christian faith, had a deep affection for Father Lacombe. He had once nursed them through a terrible epidemic of the typhoid.

It was a dark December night and the priest was resting in the Chief's tent when suddenly an Indian somewhere in the darkness shouted, "Assinew! Assinew! The Crees! The Crees!" Once again the age-old battle between the Crees and the Blackfoot had broken out.

The small camp with which Father Lacombe was sojourning was one of three Blackfoot camps. The other two camps, however, were a long way off, and help could not be expected for at least a few

hours. The bullets were whizzing everywhere, piercing all the tepees, and especially the ~~largest one~~ Chief's Teepee, where the priest was staying.

The old chief rushed out to exhort the Blackfoot to sell their lives as dearly as possible. In the darkness his voice was lost in the gunfire, the barking of dogs, the whoops of the Crees, and the wailing of the women.

Father Lacombe calmly got up, put on his cassock, kissed his Oblate crucifix, took his holy oils, and went out into the battle. He called to the Crees to withdraw, but his voice was unheard in the terrific noise. He finally gave up and devoted his attention to baptizing any of the dying who wanted his ministration.

The first victim was a young Blackfoot woman who had been shot in the head. She asked Father Lacombe to baptize her and a few minutes later she was scalped by a Cree, and her baby, whom the priest had overlooked in the darkness, was killed.

All night the battle went on, and toward dawn the braves of the distant Blackfoot camps, attracted by the firing, arrived to reenforce their people. One of the new parties of warriors was led by a young brave destined to become the greatest chief among the Blackfoot. In the darkness he was stopped by Father L acombe.

"Who are you?" asked the priest.

"Crowfoot," replied the Indian.

Father Lacombe had heard of this young man already known for his wisdom and bravery. He urged him to do what he could to save his people.

When dawn broke, twenty-five lodges had been destroyed by the Crees. In the cold December morning light Father Lacombe took his crucifix in one hand, his Red Cross flag in the other, and told his Blackfoot friends to cease firing. Then, holding his crucifix above his head, and waving his flag, he calmly walked toward the enemy.

As he walked, he called to the Crees, but they did not hear, and a heavy mist prevented them from seeing him. The Crees kept firing, too. As Father Lacombe walked toward them a bullet glanced from the frozen ground, struck him on the shoulder, and glanced off, struck him again on the forehead. Father Lacombe fell unconscious to the snow.

When they saw him fall, a fresh wave of anger and courage swept over the Blackfeet. Thinking that the Crees had killed their friend, they began to drive the enemy back. Despite their new courage the battle continued until, during a lull in the fighting a Blackfoot warrior called out to the Crees, "You have wounded the priest!"

When the Crees heard that they had injured Father Lacombe, they hastily withdrew.

Later, in the early 1880's the C. P. R. was rapidly being built across the plains from Winnipeg. When the railroad reached the Blackfoot reserve it began to be feared that the Indians would prevent the steel from going through. They had heard rumors that the coming of the railroad was but the first step in a final taking away of their reserve and such rights as they still maintained. They had heard, too, that the railroad meant the arrival of

thousands of settlers who would make it impossible for the Indians to live.

The foremen of the construction crews knew that Father Lacombe wielded a tremendous influence with the Indians. They asked him to come and save the situation if he could.

The priest lost no time. He came prepared to talk in the only language the Indian really understood . . . food and plenty of it. Father Lacombe brought to Crowfoot's camp two hundred pounds of tea, plenty of sugar, flour, and tobacco.

After the Indians had feasted, Father Lacombe made a speech. He urged that they let the railroad go through, and told them that their property rights would be respected. There was considerable grumbling among the Indians, but through the friendship of Crowfoot, who asked that they respect the word of a man who had never lied to them, they let the construction go on.

There is an interesting aftermath to this story of Father Lacombe as peacemaker for the C. P. R. In 1883 when the main line of the C. P. R. had reached Calgary, George Stephen, first president of the road made a trip out with a distinguished party. Father Lacombe was invited to lunch aboard the president's car. During the luncheon Stephen remarked that it was pleasant to get away from the hurry and scurry of work . . . out to the foothills. "In fact, gentlemen, I am going to resign as president . . . for one hour, and be plain every day George Stephen."

R. B. Angus, another of his guests, said, "Well, we can't let the road be without a president, even for one hour. I

move that Father L acombe take over in recognition of his services to us at Blackfoot Crossing."

Father Lacombe accepted the offer in the same spirit as it was made. A board meeting was held then and there. Stephen tendered his resignation and Father Lacombe was elected. The priest always full of good humor, then nominated Stephen to fulfill certain religious duties. When the hour was up another meeting was held and Stephen again shouldered the burdens of his office.

Father Lacombe performed in 1885 an even greater service than that which he did the railroad.

It was on March 27th that rumors began to spread through the small settlement of Calgary. The rumors told a grim story: of the uprising among the Saskatchewan Crees and Metis . . . of murder and pillage. Calgary was far away from the scene of such events, but the people were worried. It was known that agitators from the Cree and Metis camps had been working among the Blackfoot, and it was feared that if the Blackfoot Nation should join Riel they might easily wipe out all white settlements in the region.

It was an exciting day in the history of Calgary. A Home Guard was organized. A wire was sent to Ottawa and Regina for arms. A watch was set. Men gathered on the streets and spoke gravely of a Blackfoot attack on the town. Father Lacombe was sent for, and though he expressed faith in his friend, Crowfoot, he could not quiet the fears of the Calgary people.

In the morning Father Lacombe boarded an engine on the C. P. R.

and headed for Blackfoot Crossing to see Crowfoot. Crowfoot was surprised to see the priest, and Father Lacombe pretended that his was only a casual visit, Crowfoot said that he had heard the Metis and Crees were killing all the whites, and Father Lacombe convinced him that this was entirely false.

The Blackfoot camp was assembled and the priest told the Indians that the white men were too strong . . . that it would be foolish to take up arms. Crowfoot, too, spoke to his people, and at length told Father Lacombe that the Blackfoot, at least, would remain at peace.

In 1886 Sir John A. McDonald invited Father Lacombe to come East with Crowfoot and other chiefs who had remained loyal during the Rebellion. This was partly a gesture of appreciation, and partly a wish to impress these Indians with the might of the white man.

Whatever the motive, the tour was a triumph. The Indian chiefs were everywhere feted and entertained. They were not comfortable in the white man's civilization, however, and were most unwilling to let their great protector, Father Lacombe, out of their sight. Magnificent suites of rooms were provided for the chiefs at the hotels, but they refused to use them. They preferred to sleep in a single room, and insited that the ~~priest~~ missionary sleep there, too.

Crowfoot especially made a profound impression upon the Canadian public. Not only was he heroic in appearance, but his public utterances were also magnificent. At one time the chiefs were offered a huge pile of guns and ammunition to take back west.

Crowfoot replied that the gift would not be accepted. The Indians came in peace . . . they had not even a small knife for protection. They would accept no guns.

It would be impossible to tell all of Father Lacombe's good deeds, because no man knows all the good he did. He went wherever he was needed, no matter how cold the weather, or how weak his own physical condition. During the terrible smallpox epidemic of 1870-71, he bore winged feet. He was heard from Edmonton, then at Pitt, and Carleton. He was everywhere, tending the sick, baptizing the dying. His service to the Indians was rewarded as a missionary priest would like to be rewarded, Convinced that any man who could live among them in sickness and hard times for over twenty years must have a message of real power, Chief Sweetgrass and two thousand of his Cree Indians were baptized.

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Father Lacombe was a man of great faith and great courage. He faced fearful hardships, yet he lightened his own hardships with a delightful sense of humor. On one hard, cold trip he ran out of food. Telling about the experience afterwards he said, "If we had had a pinch or two of salt, the moccasins wouldn't have made a bad meal at all!"

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Father Lacombe is a sacred tradition in Alberta. There are two living shrines to his memory: St. Albert and the Lacombe Home at Midnapore, near Calgary. St. Albert represents the works of his younger years, while the Lacombe Home for the Aged represents the charitable ambition of his last years. He raised the money for the Home almost single handed.

A visit to St. Albert will perhaps bring you closest to an

understanding of Father Lacombe; for there you will find both the momentoes of his humble beginnings, and the realization of his dreams. If you visit St. Albert, Father Simard may very likely show you around, just as he did me, and as you stand beside Father Lacombe's statue, you will be sure that as long as there is faith in God, human courage, and interest in mankind, Father Lacombe will be remembered in Alberta.

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